

# **Arguing for Basic Income**

Ethical Foundations for a Radical Reform



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# 1

## Competing Justifications of Basic Income

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### 1. A Radical Reform

It is a beautifully, disarmingly simple idea. Under a variety of names – state bonus and social credit, social wage and social dividend, guaranteed income and citizen’s wage, citizenship income and demogrant, existence income and universal grant – it has been vindicated, using the widest range of arguments. Liberty and equality, efficiency and community, common ownership of the earth and equal sharing in the benefits of technical progress, the flexibility of the labour market and the dignity of the poor, the fight against unemployment and inhumane working conditions, against the desertification of the countryside and interregional inequalities, the viability of co-operatives and the promotion of adult education, autonomy from bosses, husbands and bureaucrats – all have been invoked in favour of what will be called here, in accordance with prevailing English usage, a *basic income*.

A basic income is an income unconditionally paid to all on an individual basis, without means test or work requirement.<sup>1</sup> In other words, it is a form of minimum income guarantee that differs from those that now exist in various European countries by virtue of the fact that it is paid:

1. to individuals rather than households;
2. irrespective of any income from other sources; and
3. without requiring any present or past work performance, or the willingness to accept a job if offered.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, the expression 'basic income' is meant here to convey both the notion that it is granted by virtue of an unconditional entitlement, and the idea that any income from other sources will come on top of the basis it provides. It is *not*, however, meant to suggest a link with so-called basic needs. As the expression will be used here, a basic income can in principle fall short of as well as exceed whatever level of income is deemed sufficient to cover a person's basic needs.<sup>3</sup>

Existing guaranteed minimum income systems – the UK's social security, the Netherlands' *bijstand*, Belgium's *minimex*, Germany's *Sozialhilfe*, France's *revenu minimum d'insertion*, etc. – vary in the extent to which the three distinctive features are actually absent. But both in principle and in practice, they all remain strongly conditional, and hence very far from a genuine basic income. Although basic income, by definition, necessarily possesses all three features, nothing in its definition prevents it from being introduced alongside other transfers the right to which, or the level of which, would remain conditional upon household composition, income from other sources, social insurance contributions, willingness to work, and so on. If a basic income were introduced, the current levels of pensions, unemployment benefits, student grants, and so forth, would no doubt require significant adjustments, but the introduction of a basic income, as such, does not demand that they should be scrapped.

A basic income does not differ just from existing guaranteed minimum income systems. It also differs, though to a lesser extent, from so-called negative income tax proposals. While they usually share the third feature with basic income proposals – no work requirement is imposed – negative income tax proposals do not usually share the first – they often operate at household level – and never the second: by definition, a negative income tax scheme can determine the level of transfer to which a person or a household is entitled (if any) only in the light of information about income from other sources. In this sense, the fundamental difference between a basic income and a negative income tax is that the former operates *ex ante*, whereas the latter operates *ex post*. This distinction is orthogonal to – though sometimes confused with – the distinction between those guaranteed minimum income schemes which create what is often called a poverty or unemployment trap – they destroy pecuniary incentives to perform paid work at the bottom of the income scale – and those which do not. On paper, an individual negative income tax and a basic income can yield exactly the same distribution of post-tax-and-transfer incomes. In particular, in both cases, taxation can be – and usually is – designed in such a way that net income rises as gross income rises at all levels of income – that is, in such a way that the poverty trap is in principle abolished. In both cases, however, it could

also be designed in such a way that net income would not rise as gross income increases below some threshold level – that is, in such a way that the negative income tax rate or the 'clawback rate' on the lowest earnings is 100 per cent. (See Figure 1.1.)

This potential identity of the distributions of net income generated by basic income and negative income tax schemes exists only on paper, however, because in the real world it does make a tremendous difference whether the minimum income guarantee is given to all *ex ante*, no questions asked – as it is under a basic income scheme – or whether it is given only to those who turn out to have had, or provide adequate evidence that they now have, an insufficient income. For this reason, a negative income tax is undoubtedly worse from the beneficiaries' standpoint than the 'financially equivalent' basic income scheme, yet it does not deserve the bad name it has on the Left because

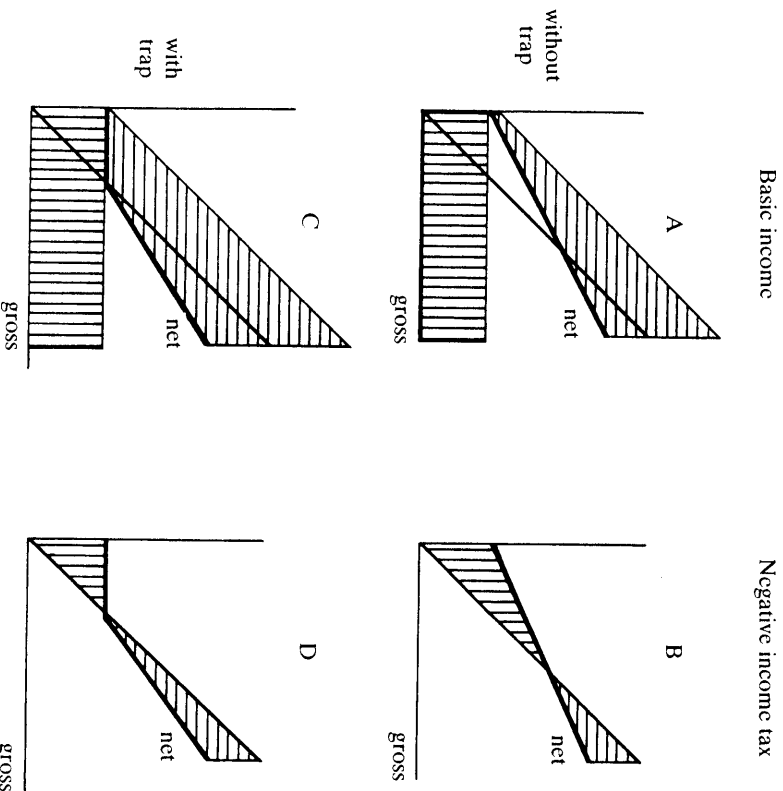


Figure 1.1 Income tax and basic income

of its association with right-wing economists such as Milton Friedman.<sup>4</sup> Keeping the level of the minimum income unchanged, replacing existing European guaranteed minimum schemes by a negative income tax of the type proposed by Friedman (i.e. without a poverty trap, as in Figure 1.1B) would be – other things remaining equal – an unambiguous improvement for the beneficiaries.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. Why Now?

The idea of a basic income is by no means new. In Britain, for example, it can be traced back at least to the end of the First World War, when Bertrand Russell suggested it as a way of combining the appeal of both socialism and anarchism, while a Quaker and Labour Party member called Dennis Milner was working out, in a short book, the first elaborate proposal for a genuine basic income.<sup>6</sup> But only in the 1980s did it begin to attract more than occasional attention. In several West European countries, a growing number of academics – but also of political and social organizations – have made it the focus of an ever-expanding discussion. Once dismissed as the *idée fixe* of a handful of cranks, it is now becoming an essential ingredient in any serious discussion of the future of advanced capitalist countries.<sup>7</sup> Why?

The first part of this book ('Socioeconomic Background') aims to answer this question. The two chapters it contains – one by a labour economist (Guy Standing) and one by a social theorist (Claus Offe), both of them among the main protagonists of the current European debate on basic income – show how the need to take the latter seriously has grown out of a number of powerful trends and the gradual realization of the inadequacy of conventional policies in the new context created as a result of these trends. I refer the reader to these two contributions for a detailed analysis, and shall restrict myself here to stressing two factors which I believe to be of paramount importance in explaining the growing saliency of the basic income discussion.

One is that it can no longer be assumed that an overwhelming majority of households can cover their basic needs thanks to the wages they owe to the job one of their members currently holds or to the benefits they owe to the job one of their members used to hold. Under this assumption, central to the conception of the modern welfare state, the safety net of social assistance could be confined to a marginal – and, ideally, shrinking – set of cases. For various reasons, this is now very far – and ever further – from being the case. Throughout Europe, an increasing number of households have had to rely on social assistance and have become caught in the net it provides. The joint impact of technical change and the internationalization of markets is making it

increasingly difficult for the economies of advanced capitalist countries to generate a sufficient number of jobs that can be profitable while providing those who hold them with a living wage. The outcome of this process is, increasingly, a 'dual economy', a 'two-thirds society', in which the most significant divide, as far as material welfare is concerned, is no longer the one that separates capitalists from workers, but the one that separates those who hold proper jobs from the rest of the population. There is no easy way of fighting this tendency. But the replacement of the safety net, in which the weakest and the unlucky get trapped, by a firm unconditional floor, on which they can securely stand – in other words, the replacement of a conditional minimum income scheme by a genuine basic income – is increasingly viewed as an indispensable ingredient in any such strategy.

A second factor, of a more ideological nature, is hardly less important, in particular on the Left. After the spectacular collapse of East European socialism, there are few people – if any – with an unscathed conviction that socialism, or even a significant step towards it, is both desirable and possible in Western Europe within our lifetimes. Are those who have lost this conviction left with nothing to hope for but the survival of the existing welfare state or, at best, some marginal improvements in its structure or size? According to many of those on the Left who are arguing for a basic income, this need not be the case. For the introduction of a basic income is not just a feasible structural improvement in the functioning of the welfare state; it is a profound reform that belongs in the same league as the abolition of slavery or the introduction of universal suffrage. Indeed, it can arguably be viewed as a way of pursuing the radical ideal to which socialism was – or should have been – only a means, while unapologetically discarding a tool which has now proved – or at any rate, is now widely believed to be – inadequate. In other words, it can be viewed as a 'capitalist road to communism'.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, if in some country, at some time, socialism were again to become a realistic possibility, basic income does not cease to be relevant. For among those who continue to believe in a desirable and feasible form of socialism, basic income is becoming increasingly popular as a central ingredient of the blueprint they advocate.<sup>9</sup> Both more modest and more radical than the notion of public ownership of the means of production, the idea of a totally unconditional income rekindles the hope that not all major steps towards the emancipation of humankind are behind us: another one is within reach.

### 3. What Do We Need Foundations For?

There is, however, one formidable ideological obstacle to such a step: the feeling – widely spread from the far Right to the far Left of the electorate, and often vigorously expressed by both politicians and academics – that introducing a basic income would be unfair: that it would amount to an institutionalization of free-riding, to the exploitation of hard workers by those able-bodied people who would choose to live on their basic incomes.<sup>10</sup>

To this challenge and its importance, the present volume owes its very existence. For if the advocates of basic incomes are to meet this challenge, they cannot content themselves with partial, limited arguments – say, to the effect that a basic income would provide a more effective way of fighting poverty, long-term unemployment, or the dual society. They need to spell out a consistent and plausible conception of the just or good society which could provide firm foundations for the legitimacy of an unconditional income. As we shall shortly see, this is not a matter of simply applying to this particular issue some pre-conceived libertarian or egalitarian ideal. In the very process of relating basic income to such ideals, one is forced to question, clarify and reformulate some of the most central principles of modern political philosophy. What is liberty? What is equality? What is efficiency? How can they be combined? How do the demands of justice relate to the concern with community? Is there any room today for a plausible radical political philosophy that does not turn out to be some version of left liberalism? These various questions, as we shall see, are central to the debate. This book, as a consequence, is not just a major substantive contribution to the discussion of an important policy issue. By going to and fro between abstract principles and concrete implications, by intertwining analytical distinctions and empirical claims, by trying to combine political relevance and intellectual rigour, by questioning the boundaries between pre-established positions – Marxist and liberal, for example – and by displaying sharp disagreements as well as honest concessions, it also constitutes an exemplar of contemporary political philosophy at work.

In the remainder of this Introduction, I shall not try to summarize the ethical arguments which make up the bulk of this volume, and even less to settle in advance the issues on which contributors disagree. What I will try to do is lay out the landscape, by presenting a sketchy critical survey of the main ethical arguments that have been offered in favour of a basic income. The survey makes no claim to being impartial, even though I have deliberately refrained from spelling out my own views on the subject.<sup>11</sup> Nor does it make a claim to being exhaustive, although it

does, I hope, provide enough historical and conceptual background to enable readers unfamiliar with contemporary theories of justice to make sense of the arguments of subsequent contributions by understanding how they fit into a wider theoretical discussion.

#### 1. LIBERTY

#### 4. Compensation for the Infringement of Common Ownership Rights

‘It is not charity, but a right, not bounty but justice, that I am pleading for’ (Paine, 1796: 612, 617). As this statement by one of most outspoken forerunners of basic income makes it quite natural to look for its foundations in a rights-based approach.<sup>12</sup> So-called *libertarian* or historical-entitlement theories of justice are therefore an obvious place to start our investigation. Rights, according to these theories, are logically prior to social institutions, which can be just only if they respect these rights.<sup>13</sup> How could such a rights-based approach justify a basic income?

On a libertarian account, the just distribution is one that results from voluntary transactions. Clearly, such a criterion does not impose any particular pattern on the distribution of income, and it may therefore seem that any attempt to provide basic income with libertarian foundations is doomed from the start. Voluntary transactions yield a just distribution, however, only if they operate from a set of legitimate initial endowments. These endowments are often themselves the outcome of voluntary transactions, but their constituent parts must ultimately originate in (initially unowned) nature. If there is a libertarian case for a basic income, it would seem, it must be rooted in the rules that govern the appropriation of natural resources, or – as these rules are often called – in some principle of original appropriation. This principle itself is, of course, a non-starter if it boils down to proclaiming ‘First come, first served’ – if it states that every unappropriated natural resource is up for grabs, full stop.<sup>14</sup> Prospects look brighter, however, if the principle imposes some constraint on this process, to reflect the notion that the earth is for all to share.

This sort of argument can be traced as far back as Gerrard Winstanley (1649) and the Levellers’ movement. It has been elaborated by a number of nineteenth-century social reformers: by William Cobbett (1827), Samuel Read (1829) and Poullet Scrope (1833) in England,<sup>15</sup> Charles Fourier (1836: 490–92) and his disciple Jean-Baptiste Godin (1871: 212–13) in France. According to Fourier, for example, the

violation of each person's natural right to hunt, fish, pick fruit and let her/his cattle graze on the commons implies that 'civilization' owes subsistence to everyone unable to meet her/his needs. Robert Nozick (1974: 178-9) explicitly refers to Fourier's argument and rephrases it more precisely, in support of the so-called 'Lockean proviso': the stipulation that the private appropriation of natural resources should leave 'enough and as good' for others (Locke, 1690: section 25). According to Nozick's principle, the original appropriation of a natural object can be legitimate only if no one is made worse off as a result of no longer being able to use it. Hence anyone whose welfare is lower than it would have been had nothing been privately appropriated is entitled to a compensation that brings up her/his level of welfare to whatever it would have been in that state of nature.

Taking these premisses for granted, does it follow that a basic income is justified? First it must be noted that the counterfactual exercise involved in this approach is of a particularly tricky nature. For if I try to figure out whether my fate would have been better in the state of nature, I quickly run into the question of how many people must be assumed, in that state, to share the natural resources with me. If I take population size to be what it is now, I arbitrarily abstract from the – no doubt – massive demographic impact of centuries of private landownership. If instead I try to guess what the population would have been had the state of nature persisted until now, I could not easily dismiss the suggestion that I would not have existed, and hence would hardly be in a position to claim any compensation at all.<sup>16</sup> But there is something even worse for our present purposes. Even if the counterfactual exercise could meaningfully be conducted, it would certainly not justify a basic income. True, the transfer that Fourier and Nozick justify rests not on charity or solidarity but on a right to compensation, and it can therefore be paid without any reference to work, whether current, past, or potential – that is, it can be unconditional in our sense (3). Arguably, it also needs to be paid irrespective of people's actual income level – that is, it must be unconditional in sense (2) – even though people's earning power is doubtless an important component of their welfare position. But it would definitely not be given indiscriminately to all citizens. If some citizens enjoy a very low level of welfare owing to some physical handicap, for example, the amount they will be entitled to will most probably be zero, as their welfare would be even lower in the state of nature. As I pointed out above, the notion of a basic income does not preclude it from existing alongside additional transfers to the handicapped, but it cannot possibly be consistent with some people being deprived of their right to it precisely because of their handicaps.

Does Nozick's criterion constitute the sole, or the most plausible,

reading of Fourier's or his English predecessors' intuition? If someone steals all the apples in your garden and makes a lot of money out of selling the juice s/he makes with them, it does not seem sufficient to demand that the thief should pay you part of the proceeds to offset your welfare loss, while being allowed to keep all the rest. Why should you not have a legitimate claim to a fair share in the profit s/he made? If we really own the earth in common, this is – according to Baruch Brody (1983) – the proper analogy to use. And because our (unwaived) right to use common natural resources has been violated by private appropriators, we are entitled to far more than what is required to prevent us from being worse off than we would be in the state of nature. We are entitled to a fair share in whatever has been produced with natural resources we could otherwise have used. Entitlement to this fair share is, no doubt, unconditional with respect to both income from other sources and willingness to work,<sup>17</sup> and it does not discriminate in terms of personal features, as we have seen Fourier–Nozick compensations do. The fact that some people would have been unable to use the commons – owing to a physical handicap, for example – by no means deprives them of their share, just as the fact that you cannot pick your apples yourself does not mean that anyone can come along and steal them. But what is the criterion that should be used to determine fair shares? How is it possible to select a non-arbitrary point between a share that barely offsets the welfare loss and a share that absorbs the whole benefit from private appropriation?

### 5. Equal Right to the Value of Natural Resources

This question cannot be satisfactorily resolved unless we shift from Charles Fourier's to Thomas Paine's earlier interpretation of the implications of our common ownership of the earth. In his defence of what can plausibly be viewed as the first elaborate proposal of a genuine basic income,<sup>18</sup> Paine starts with a variant of the argument considered above. Given that subsisting by hunting is no longer a feasible option for most,

the first principle of civilization ought to have been, and ought still to be, that the condition of every person born into the world, after a state of civilization commences, ought not to be worse than if he had been born before that period.

(Paine, 1796: 610)

However, he soon shifts to a distinct argument, which warrants a different criterion:

It is a position not to be controverted, that the earth, in its natural,

uncultivated state was, and ever would have continued to be, the common property of the human race.

As the land is cultivated,

it is the value of the improvement, only, and not the earth itself, that is in individual property. Every proprietor, therefore, of cultivated lands, owes to the community a ground-rent (for I know of no better term to express the idea) for the land which he holds; and it is from this ground-rent that the fund proposed in this plan is to issue.

(Paine, 1796: 611)

Out of this fund,

there shall be paid to every person, when arrived at the age of twenty-one years, the sum of fifteen pounds sterling, as a compensation in part, for the loss of his or her natural inheritance, by the introduction of the system of landed property. And also, the sum of ten pounds per annum, during life, to every person now living, of the age of fifty years, and to all others as they shall arrive at that age.

Payments, Paine insists, should be made 'to every person, rich or poor', because it is in lieu of the natural inheritance, which, as a right, belongs to every man, over and above the property he may have created, or inherited from those who did.

(Paine, 1796: 612-13)

This idea of an equal right to the value of the earth will reappear later in various forms. It appears, for example, in Herbert Spencer's (1851) writings on land reform, in Henry George's (1879) and the Geogist movement's advocacy of a 'single tax', and in the normative writings of Léon Walras (1896), one of the founding fathers of mathematical economics; and it has recently been revived in a number of historical and analytical papers by the left-libertarian political philosopher Hillel Steiner (1977, 1982, 1987). In all these versions, we definitely end up with the justification of a genuine basic income as defined in Section 1. Every living human being is unambiguously entitled to an equal share of the total value of natural resources.

No doubt, there are some nagging difficulties as soon as one attempts to work out detailed schemes. For example, should all receive the same total amount over their lifetime, or are those living longer entitled to more – or less? Should those who belong to a generation with few members be entitled to more than those who live in a crowded world, and if not, how can equality be implemented across generations? More fundamentally, perhaps, how is the value of (unimproved) natural resources to be assessed? Steiner advocates the use of competitive prices. Estimating these prices is no doubt difficult, owing to human

improvements that cannot be detached from the raw land on which they have been made. But it is in principle possible to ask, about each chunk of earth – abstracting from the improvements made on it, but not from those made on anything else – how much people would be willing to pay for it. This could provide a reasonable approximation of what the component parts of the earth would go for in the counterfactual equal-endowments, perfectly competitive auction that provides the reference model. But what is it that justifies the choice of such a competitive value as the 'true' value of natural resources? Moreover, does the whole approach not rest, as radical environmentalists would argue, on an unacceptable reduction of the earth and all non-human living beings to a bundle of economic resources to be metered out and ruthlessly exploited?

Suppose, however, that all these difficulties can be solved – as I believe they can. Even then, it looks certain that no more can be justified in this way than an extremely meagre grant – one, moreover, that keeps shrinking relative to total income, as natural resources are depleted while capital, skills and people become more abundant.<sup>19</sup> This shrinking could conceivably be blocked by stipulating that the depletion of natural resources should not diminish people's entitlement, as each generation must make sure that it increases the capital stock to make up for its contribution to the unavoidable depletion of natural resources.<sup>20</sup> The funds available, in other words, could be determined by the full 'value' of the planet's resources before humankind started exploiting them, but this would not make that much difference, and the legitimate level of basic income would remain very low.

A far more significant increase would occur if, instead of just this compensatory amount of capital, all the wealth produced by earlier generations could be viewed as a common inheritance. But this would involve a decisive departure from the libertarian perspective. For produced goods, according to the latter, have a status that differs radically from that of natural goods. They rightfully belong to those who created them, who are therefore entitled to use them as they please – and this includes the right to donate them to whomever they wish.<sup>21</sup> But this is not the end of the story. In his contribution to the present volume, Hillel Steiner endeavours to circumvent this obstacle by using two ingenious strategies. One consists in arguing that bequests cannot count as voluntary transactions, because the persons who make them (at the moment they are actually made) are dead. What has been bequeathed, therefore, can be assimilated to natural resources, and its value, too, must be shared equally among all. Secondly, human genetic information is a gift from nature, and its appropriation by its carriers therefore bears sufficient resemblance to the private appropriation of natural resources of the standard kind for more redistribution to become

legitimate, consistent with libertarian premises.

As the reader will discover from Alan Carling's comment, Steiner's intriguing suggestions have not persuaded everyone. Let me just add one question to the discussion. Suppose one grants both Steiner's premises and his argument. Is it not most unlikely that a significant increase in the legitimate level of basic income would thereby be justified? For is it not the case, first, that turning bequests (once these are banned) into gifts (still unobjectionable from Steiner's standpoint) is bound to erode away most of what was hoped would swell the available funds?<sup>22</sup> And secondly, would not the assimilation of genes to natural resources justify (at best) a system of lump-sum taxes on the gifted and lump-sum subsidies to the poorly endowed, but not an increase in the uniform grant warranted, on Steiner's account, by the common ownership of the earth?

## 6. Equal Right to the Contribution of Social Assets

Instead of thus trying to increase the stock of goods whose value is available for distribution, we may want to contemplate a third, quite distinct approach, which – curiously – consists in turning Locke against himself. Libertarians are committed to giving people the right to the product of their contribution. But then, surely, if men own the earth in common, the *part of the total product* that can be attributed to natural resources should be shared equally among all. How is this part to be determined? When arguing that labour's contribution accounts for most of the product, Locke (1690) implicitly offers an answer to this question. Try to imagine, he says, what the earth would produce without man's labour. If you deduct this hypothetical product from the actual product, you get the part of the total product that can rightfully be ascribed to labour.<sup>23</sup> Let us now turn things round. It is easy enough to imagine what humans would produce without natural resources to work with: nothing. The difference between this and the total product is what can be rightfully ascribed to the earth, and therefore shared equally by all. The whole product, in other words, is up for distribution. And even if, for incentive reasons, one would not be well advised to distribute everything equally, it would none the less be legitimate to do so from a libertarian point of view, since one would thereby do neither more nor less than pay the owner of a factor of production what would not have been produced without the latter's contribution.

It may legitimately be objected that Locke's criterion is inconsistent, since applying it to each factor of production in turn will in general lead to distributing far more than 100 per cent of the product. But what is the alternative? Using marginal products (instead of aggregate differential

products, as I did) would generate similar inconsistencies outside the special case of constant returns, and is anyway altogether implausible as an account of each factor's total contribution to the *product*.<sup>24</sup> Using competitive values – thus returning to the previous approach – is no more plausible as a way of interpreting how much each factor contributes to production, since it would imply, for example, that labour's relative contribution to the product is less, other things remaining equal, if people are keen to work (and therefore willing to accept a lower wage) than if they are not.<sup>25</sup> And other allocation principles for a joint product may perhaps be defensible as indices of bargaining power, and hence as predictors of actual shares, but not as normative criteria reflecting the notion that each contributor is entitled to his/her own product.<sup>26</sup>

The same difficulty besets any other attempt to justify a substantial basic income by identifying the part of the product that can be ascribed to something owned by the community as a whole and arguing that it must be distributed equally among all. For example, it is plausible enough to claim, as James Buchanan does, that a very large part of the total product can be ascribed to the 'legal-governmental framework', for:

in a setting where there is no enforced and protected difference between 'mine' and 'thine', individuals will exert relatively little effort, and a large share of that which is exerted will be devoted to predation and defense.<sup>27</sup>

Similarly, one can most plausibly assert, as John Rawls has recently done, that a very significant part of the social product can be traced to the diversity of talents, both qualitative (as in an orchestra) and quantitative (as in Ricardian comparative advantage), and hence to a specifically social factor irreducible to the talents held by society's individual members.<sup>28</sup> But in either case, the attempt to turn the recognition of a massive specifically social contribution into a rights-based argument for basic income is bound to be blocked by the impossibility of finding a consistent criterion for assessing this contribution. Furthermore, even if such a criterion could be found, it is by no means obvious that each citizen would have a 'natural right' to an equal share of this contribution, just as each has a 'natural right' to an equal share of natural resources.

Thus, though emphasizing the productive contribution of natural resources, of the legal framework, or of talent diversity is no doubt effective for the purpose of undermining the Lockean-libertarian (and Ricardian-socialist) thesis of a right to the full product of one's labour, it seems unlikely to provide a consistent argument for a basic income that would exceed the pretty low *per capita* value of natural resources. The most a libertarian approach can justify, it seems, is an admittedly strong



right to a pathetically small grant. However, this should not be interpreted to mean that no appeal to freedom could legitimate a significant basic income. The whole libertarian perspective rests, after all, on a very peculiar interpretation of a free society, defined as one whose institutions respect and protect a consistent set of (somehow pre-existing) natural rights. If a free society is conceived instead as one whose members enjoy maximum equal (or maximin) *real freedom* – that is, not just the right but also the material means to conduct their lives as they wish – then the justification of a substantial basic income is no longer out of sight.<sup>29</sup> I return below to this real-libertarian approach, as a particular brand of egalitarianism.

## II. EQUALITY

### 7. Equal Share in the Social Surplus

What does the egalitarian ideal require? If it simply required the equality of all incomes, whatever features people possess and whatever they do, the egalitarian justification of basic income – indeed, of a basic income that would exhaust the entire net product – would be straightforward. But this is an untenable interpretation of the egalitarian ideal. First, different people have different needs. Secondly, they produce different amounts of effort – at least in a society that is not so oppressive as to prevent people from choosing how hard and how long they work. Any sensible version of egalitarianism must take such differences into account, and accordingly deviate from strict income equality in order to cater for needs and reward effort, but it does not follow that no basic income could be justified on sensible egalitarian grounds. It is precisely such a justification that is offered in the elaborate argument presented by John Baker in his contribution to this volume. The egalitarian ideal, in his view, requires differentiated transfers in order to cover everyone's basic needs, the definition of which can be settled by social agreement. It also requires that due compensation should be given to those who perform work, as a function of the length of this work and the effort involved, again assessed using socially agreed standards. But in a reasonably affluent society, a surplus remains, which can and must be distributed equally among all. Thus, egalitarianism does justify a basic income. In their comments on Baker's contribution, Richard Norman agrees, while Brian Barry disagrees.

Again, I shall not attempt to pre-empt this important dispute, and shall instead put it in perspective by exploring two other tracks along

which an egalitarian justification of basic income has been or could be constructed. Each has its point of departure in one interpretation of the core of Marxist political philosophy and its point of arrival in the vicinity of the real-libertarian position alluded to at the end of the previous section.<sup>30</sup>

### 8. A Capitalist Road to Communism

According to one interpretation, Marxist political philosophy essentially consists in a critique of *alienation*, narrowly defined as the property of those activities which are not performed for their own sake. It warrants only an instrumental, empirically contingent justification of socialism, the public ownership of the means of production. What justifies the struggle for socialism, in this perspective, is not that a socialist society is a just or more just society, but rather that, having got rid of the capitalist fetters on its productive forces, it can move faster towards full communism. As suggested in Marx's (1875) elliptical passage on the subject, full communism refers to a regime in which people will no longer be rewarded according to their contributions, but entirely according to their needs, and in which, therefore, they will perform only (sufficiently productive) unalienated activities, activities that are rewarding enough in themselves. It refers, in other words, to a state of affairs in which the 'realm of freedom' will have been fully realized. The most straightforward way of implementing communism thus defined, once its material preconditions have been realized, is in the form of an unconditional basic income, supplemented by some specific transfers to those with special needs and pitched at such a level that nothing is left to reward contributions to production.

Whether under capitalist or socialist property relations, any attempt to realize communism in this sense would unavoidably, at the present stage of development of the productive forces, lead to disaster, for incentives to work and save (under both systems) and to invest (under capitalist conditions) would be dramatically curtailed. One might be tempted to conclude that what matters, for the present, is to accumulate and innovate to the utmost, in order to boost labour productivity to such an extent that soon no material incentive will be required to elicit an adequate amount of labour. The optimal level of basic income is then most likely to be zero. However, if the communist ideal is to take a shape that is at all defensible, it cannot be given this teleological interpretation, for it would then legitimize the sacrifice of an indeterminate number of generations for the sake of bringing about some (hypothetical) future state whose benefits they will not enjoy. If communism, as defined, is desirable, one must rather try to realize it as

much as possible for the present generation, subject to not worsening the potential for its future realization.

The most straightforward interpretation of such partial realization consists in introducing an initially low basic income and determining its level in such a way that the *proportion* of total income taking the form of a basic income is maximized, subject to everyone's needs being covered.<sup>31</sup> As the productive forces develop, the amount of effort required to produce a given output decreases. Hence weaker material incentives are needed to satisfy the subsistence constraint, and the proportion of total income that needs to be distributed according to contributions is reduced, up to the (notional) point where it falls to zero and full communism can be achieved. Whether this process should take place in a capitalist or socialist framework is, in this perspective, a purely instrumental question. It all depends on which mode of production enables society to move closer to full communism.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, the 'Marxian' criterion for determining the proper level of the basic income consists in maximizing basic income as *a proportion* of average income, subject to guaranteeing subsistence to all and to maintaining the productive potential (at least) undiminished for the next generation. This criterion, however, is indefensible.<sup>33</sup> For ease of explaining why, I shall define abundance in the weak sense, or *weak abundance*, as a situation in which it is possible sustainably to provide an (unconditional) basic income that exceeds the subsistence level. As long as weak abundance in this sense has not been achieved, the 'Marxian' criterion can be interpreted both in terms of the maximum realization of communism – distribution according to needs – and in terms of the maximum expansion of the 'realm of freedom' – the free choice of activities by all. For under such circumstances, the criterion demands that one should guarantee everyone's subsistence through some sort of *conditional* income guarantee, while introducing a low or 'partial' basic income at the highest level compatible with guaranteeing subsistence to all (by means of the conditional system) and preserving the productive potential. The smaller the gap between the basic income and the subsistence level – in other words, the larger the part of the people's needs that is covered in unconditional fashion – the larger people's real freedom to choose activities that are intrinsically rewarding, and the more they will do so.

As soon as weak abundance obtains, however, a tension arises between the pursuit of communism and the concern with freedom. When the highest sustainable basic income exceeds the subsistence level, maximizing basic income in relative terms subject to the subsistence constraint and maximizing it in *absolute* terms subject to the same constraint no longer coincide. Suppose one has organized transfers in

such a way that the (sustainable) absolute level of basic income is maximized. Any further taxation would reduce this level, owing (mainly) to adverse incentive effects. But such further taxation is required by the 'Marxian' criterion, which demands that the relative level of basic income (the proportion of total income that is distributed unconditionally) be maximized, as long as it does not threaten the subsistence guarantee. Since the highest sustainable basic income has been assumed to exceed the subsistence level – this is what weak abundance means – there is room for increased taxation of other income (or lower net pay) without this constraint being violated. The 'Marxian' criterion, therefore, requires that taxation be increased, beyond the top of the 'Laffer curve', to a point where the (absolute) level of basic income is lower than it could sustainably be.<sup>34</sup>

Such 'prohibitive' taxation – taxation beyond the point at which the absolute level of basic income is maximized – would worsen the situation of both net contributors (because of higher tax rates) and net beneficiaries (because of a lower basic income).<sup>35</sup> The claim, however, is not that application of the 'Marxian' criterion will maximize welfare, but that it will expand the realm of freedom as much as is currently possible, given the level of development of the productive forces. Precisely because of the disincentive effect of higher taxation (or lower net pay), the amount of paid work that gets done under the Marxian criterion is smaller than it would be if the absolute level of basic income were maximized. And it might therefore be argued that more people spend more of their time on unalienated, intrinsically rewarding activities, and hence that the realm of freedom is more fully realized than it would be with a higher basic income.

### 9. From the Realm of Freedom to the Difference Principle

This argument, however, does not hold water. First of all, it can be objected that the net effect on the volume of unalienated, non-intrinsically rewarding activities is uncertain, for one cannot simply identify activities that are unpaid or undeclared and activities that are performed for their own sake. The main effect of higher taxation may just be a substitution of poorly productive and no more attractive informal toil for more productive formal employment, with an overall increase in alienated labour.<sup>36</sup> Secondly, the amount of free time one enjoys is only one dimension of freedom; the amount of income one has available for use in one's free time is another. Hence, even if (genuine) free time increases as the 'Marxian' criterion takes us beyond the maximum absolute level of basic income, this need not mean an overall increase in freedom, since at the same time everyone's income goes down.<sup>37</sup> Thirdly, and most decisively, even in the leisure dimension itself, there is

no freedom-based rationale for the 'Marxian' criterion. For even if further taxation increases the volume of unalienated activities, it *decreases* the *freedom* to engage in such activities. With a higher basic income at a lower level of taxation, all have – *ceteris paribus* – broader opportunities to do whatever they want to do, including such activities. If they do more of them when the 'Marxian' criterion is fulfilled, it is not because their freedom to engage in them has been enhanced, but because their freedom to do other things – namely, engage in more lucrative activities – has been curtailed.

What this shows is not yet that there is no Marxian argument for a basic income to be found along this track, but that if there is such an argument, it must be of a perfectionistic nature – that is, appeal to a conception of the good society that rests on some particular view of the nature of the good life. For if the 'Marxian criterion' is to be justified, it cannot be by reference to a concern with people's freedom, but rather as a restriction of people's freedom in order to foster a particular type of life which consists in unalienated activities. One may have serious qualms about the substantiated acceptability of a perfectionistic justification in a pluralist society, in which people disagree about many things, including whether alienation, as defined, makes an activity, on balance, any less worthwhile. But even leaving such qualms aside, there are strong reasons to doubt the very possibility of a perfectionistic justification of basic income, for a basic income is bound to be an extremely gross tool for anyone concerned to foster a particular conception of the good life. If one believes that paid work, however freely accepted, must be discouraged, and unpaid activities encouraged, one will surely also have a view about what these unpaid activities should consist in – say, 'self-realization' or 'the practice of virtue', as distinct, for example, from watching TV, playing marbles or bickering. A completely unconditional income to which people are entitled, no matter how they conduct their life, seems a particularly ineffectual instrument in the service of a perfectionistic ideal.

The alternative is to reinterpret the 'realm of freedom' approach in a way that remains precise enough, but is no longer tied to the 'Marxian' criterion – to the maximization of the ratio of basic income to average income, or of the proportion of the total product that is distributed according to needs rather than contribution. The most obvious choice, suggested by the previous discussion, consists in switching over to a straightforward maximization of basic income in absolute terms – subject again, presumably, to guaranteeing everyone's subsistence and to preserving the productive potential. For this position coincides with the 'Marxian' criterion as long as weak abundance is not achieved. Once it is achieved, it is precisely the position against which we were at a loss to

vindicate that criterion on grounds of freedom.

Thus modified, the 'Marxian' criterion converges with the one associated with the justification of basic income that can arguably be constructed on the basis of the Difference Principle, at least in John Rawls's (1971) initial formulation. For if one pays attention, as Rawls invites us to do, not just to income but also to wealth, powers and the social bases of self-respect, there is a strong presumption that the guaranteed minimum income he explicitly advocates (Rawls, 1971: 275) should take the form of an unconditional basic income pitched – in order to expand as much as possible the set of 'all-purpose means' available to the least disadvantaged – at the highest sustainable level. Whether or not it is fair to Rawls himself, this real-libertarian approach to basic income undoubtedly echoes many pleas for basic income of a more casual nature.<sup>38</sup> Clearly, it cannot be viewed as a strictly egalitarian position, not even in the qualified sense in which Baker's position could. But by focusing on the least advantaged, it still has strong egalitarian credentials, and it is bound to justify a more generous basic income than any other approach could – including Baker's or the one suggested by the second Marxist track, to which I now turn.<sup>39</sup>

#### 10. Exploitation Reduced, Resources Equalized

This other egalitarian track takes its departure from Marxist political philosophy, now understood as basically consisting in a critique of capitalist *exploitation*. It entails a direct, non-instrumental justification of socialism, defined as the joint ownership of all means of production by the working class. As far as basic income is concerned, this brand of Marxist political philosophy looks distinctly unpromising. For exploiting someone must consist, on any intuitively plausible account, in extracting some benefit from someone else's labour (or in doing so under some specific circumstances or in some specific way), and it is hard to see how a principle that would indict exploitation so conceived could also justify a basic income. Indeed, there is every reason to fear that the opposite will be the case: that this very principle will condemn the introduction of a basic income as the beginning of a new form of exploitation, the exploitation of the net contributors to the basic income by its net beneficiaries. This fear, I believe, is fully justified for the standard concept of exploitation, defined as the extraction of surplus labour; but the remarks made earlier (Sections 5–6) about the massive contribution of 'social assets' (natural resources, the legal framework, talent diversity) should have shed serious doubts on the right-to-the-full-product principle, and hence on the normative relevance of exploitation conceived as the violation of this principle.

Recent Marxist thought, however, has produced an alternative interpretation of exploitation which is simultaneously immune to these doubts and far more congenial to the justification of a basic income. John Roemer's 'property-relations' or 'game-theoretical' construal of capitalist exploitation as an inequality in material welfare deriving from an inequality in alienable assets.<sup>40</sup> This definition may not be defensible as an explication of the intuitive notion of exploitation. (It implies, for example, that someone who chooses *not* to work and to live off her/his fellows' labour, thanks to modest interest payments on a below-average share of assets, may be exploited.) But the equal-endowments principle to which it points<sup>41</sup> undoubtedly provides a promising normative basis for the justification of basic income. Clearly, one straightforward way of abolishing capitalist exploitation as defined would consist in giving everyone an equal share of society's alienable assets.<sup>42</sup> Unless one arbitrarily restricts the demands of justice to production assets (workshops and shares, not mansions and cash), this prompts the suggestion that whatever is being inherited or donated in the society considered should be taxed away and distributed equally to all as a uniform basic income.

This suggestion converges with what follows from Ronald Dworkin's (1981, 1987) conception of equality of external resources. As long as one abstracts from inequalities in internal resources or talents, the egalitarian ideal requires, according to Dworkin, that people should be given nothing but equal cash grants with which they can then acquire real resources at prices that should reflect the latter's true opportunity costs – that is, how precious they are to other potential acquirers. In a way, this only provides a sophisticated reformulation of the old idea that what must be distributed equally among all is not just – as in the Paine–George Steiner tradition – what we have received from nature, but everything we have received from previous generations.<sup>43</sup>

There are, however, two major objections which this Roemer–Dworkin approach needs to answer if it is to be usable for the justification of a significant basic income. One is that it stops halfway. Once egalitarian concerns are extended from alienable assets to inalienable assets, from external resources to internal resources, as both Roemer and Dworkin claim they must be, it becomes hard to see how a uniform basic income could be justified, rather than a far more differentiated system of taxes on talents and compensations for handicaps. The second major objection is that a tax on bequests and gifts cannot be expected to finance anything like a substantial basic income. Even if the tax were 100 per cent and if there were no effect on the tax base, one could finance only a basic income at 10 to 15 per cent of GNP *per capita*. I believe these two objections can be satisfactorily met, but it

is of crucial importance that they should be addressed if this Roemer–Dworkin approach is to yield what it promises.<sup>44</sup>

### III. COMMUNITY

#### 11. Full Citizenship for All

Whether the emphasis is on liberty or on equality – a close look reveals that both are involved in each of the justifications surveyed so far – it can rightfully be observed that we have been sticking since the beginning to a purely individualistic perspective. The question we have been considering all along is whether some defensible conception of the fair distribution of burdens and benefits among individual members of a society would justify the granting of a basic income and, if so, at what level and under what conditions. This individualistic outlook, shared by every one of the conceptions of justice presented above – from the far Right to the far Left, from the least to the most redistributive – has been sharply criticized as part of the so-called communitarian critique of liberalism. Is there no way of arguing for basic income, not as the object of just individual claims, but as an essential instrument for the achievement of a society's *common good*?

One can think of the following sort of argument. Whether a society is a good society depends above all on the density and quality of the network of human relations in which it consists. A society which excludes a significant proportion of its members from full participation in its life cannot possibly be a good society, both because of the impoverished life it imposes on the excluded and because of the climate of tension and insecurity that tends to permeate all layers of society as a consequence of the 'antisocial' behaviour fostered by exclusion.<sup>45</sup> If one is to be a full citizen, a full participant in the community, it does not matter only that one should have access to adequate means of subsistence. It is also crucial that this access should be secured in a way that does not stigmatize or humiliate, in a way that does not prevent or discourage attempts to escape poverty by taking a job or acquiring further training, or in a way that makes any planning nearly impossible because of permanent uncertainty. These are the sort of considerations that may lead a communitarian, someone with a paramount concern for a society's common good, to favour an income unconditionally paid to all on an individual basis, without means test or work requirement: a basic income.

Arguments along these lines are presented in Bill Jordan's contribution to this volume.<sup>46</sup> In their comments, Michael Freedman agrees with

the substance of this position, while André Gorz forcefully disagrees. Following an old lineage of social thinkers – from Edward Bellamy (1888, 1897) and Joseph Popper-Lynkeus (1912) to the *distributistes* (J. Duboin, 1932; M.L. Duboin, 1985), the *federalistes* (Marc, 1972; Marc-Lipianski, 1984) and Gunnar Adler-Karlsson (1979) – André Gorz has been arguing for a social income linked to the performance of a social service of considerable length (20,000 hours).<sup>47</sup> Like Jordan's, his argument can easily be phrased in communitarian terms. Full membership in the community means enjoying common rights, but also fulfilling common duties. A successful fight against exclusion is therefore inconsistent with lifting the competition to work. Doubts about the possibility of efficiently allocating such a large amount of labour (and the means of production it requires) without relying on the market have now become so strong and so widespread that the proposal of a massive social service is now likely to sound wildly utopian. But even a watered-down version of Gorz's proposal remains a challenge for Jordan's position. In the fight against exclusion, are wage and training subsidies not a better tool than an indiscriminate basic income? It may be that a subsidized, 'unreal' job does not provide the social recognition and social power people seek (in addition to money) from a job. But if things are kept sufficiently opaque (so that few people are able to work out which jobs are subsidized for their own sake), is it not plausible that massive wage subsidies will outperform basic income from a communitarian standpoint?

#### IV. EFFICIENCY

##### 12. Target Efficiency and Economic Efficiency

Alongside (libertarian and egalitarian) justice arguments and (communitarian) common-good arguments, scores of efficiency-based arguments have also been made in favour of basic income. Efficiency claims, however, form a highly heterogeneous set.<sup>48</sup> In one sense, efficiency refers simply to the extent to which a value is realized, or a general principle met, as a consequence of the proposed measure. In this sense one can claim, for example, that basic income is more efficient than actual or potential alternatives as a strategy for equalizing resources or for turning the excluded into full citizens. Efficiency arguments of this type are, of course, just reformulations of the arguments we have been considering so far.

In other cases, efficiency refers to the extent to which some particular partial objective is achieved by the measure that is being proposed. It is

sometimes claimed, for example, that basic income provides, relative to existing institutions or rival proposals, an efficient way of removing poverty, fighting long-term unemployment, stabilizing small farmers' incomes, reducing economic inequalities between men and women, or improving working conditions. Indeed, most pleas for basic income take the form of such an argument or of a concatenation of such arguments. But arguments of this type are plagued by the following difficulty. Given that basic income actually enables one to achieve the stated objective better, and it is agreed that this objective is valuable, it generally involves an additional cost and therefore a reduced ability to pursue other objectives left unmentioned, but none the less also valuable. However important they may be in public debate – in particular to refute efficiency-based defences of the status quo – these arguments leave open the question of the overall effect and can therefore always be countered by asking 'So what?' This riposte is particularly effective when, as is usually the case, different social categories are interested to very different extents in a more effective pursuit of the stated objective – say, the reduction of long-term unemployment or the promotion of co-operatives. Why should others be made to pay the cost of pursuing more efficiently an objective in which only some are interested? It is precisely from the insufficiency of such partial arguments that arguments based on an explicit conception of a just or good society, such as those discussed in previous sections, derive their importance.

However, two categories of efficiency arguments of the partial type play such a crucial role in the debate on basic income, and on social policy generally, that they deserve a special discussion in the present context. One of them interprets efficiency as *target efficiency* – the extent to which a social policy programme provides help to those who need it, with a given budget. At first sight it is very difficult to see how a basic income could bear, on this score, highly differentiated welfare programmes involving a battery of means tests and work conditions. Yet in Chapter 12, Robert Goodin argues that under plausible factual conditions it is not unreasonable to believe that basic income would outperform conditional schemes even in terms of this criterion, their advocates' favourite standard.

A second partial sense of efficiency which deserves special attention is *economic efficiency*, understood as the extent to which economic growth is being fostered. Ever since the first (remembered) book-length plea for basic income (Milner, 1920), efficiency arguments of this type have played a major role in the debate. Many of these arguments – in particular those stressing the contribution a basic income would make to boosting or stabilizing effective demand<sup>49</sup> – are too general to justify a preference for basic income over the more conditional types of

redistribution embodied in existing welfare states. But others, illustrated by Guy Standing in his contribution to this volume and briefly surveyed in Chapter 13, do attempt to show how the very unconditional nature of basic income can make a specific contribution to economic growth. In that chapter, I present the conjecture that there is a close connection between the availability of efficiency arguments of this particular sort and the political feasibility of major social reforms such as the introduction of a basic income. The conjecture is not that for basic income to be feasible it must be shown that it is *optimal* for growth, but that a plausible case must be made for its having a positive impact, relative to the status quo, on both the situation of the worst off ('justice') and the national product ('efficiency').<sup>50</sup> If something like this conjecture is correct, we are led to a strange paradox, on which I want to reflect briefly before drawing this introductory chapter to a close.

### 13. A Green Case for Basic Income?

Among all political forces in Europe today, Green parties have undoubtedly been keenest to embrace the idea of a basic income and make it part of their political platforms.<sup>51</sup> One potential explanation is that there is a strong ecological case for such a proposal, along the following lines. What is best for the sake of output growth need not be best for welfare growth, because GNP accounting neglects both the environmental component in the present generation's welfare and the welfare of future generations. As soon as these two factors are taken into account – so the argument goes – it becomes plain that what we should aim at, for the sake of efficiency in this expanded sense, is not maximum growth but some way of braking the growth process that avoids the suffering involved in massive involuntary unemployment. And this is exactly what a basic income seems to provide, for it effects a partial uncoupling between contributing to the GNP and sharing in its benefits. The higher it is, the lower the individual incentive to work and save, and the lower, therefore, the GNP's propensity to grow. An optimal level of basic income can thus be determined, which slows growth down sufficiently to protect our own interest in a healthy environment and our offspring's interest in adequate natural resources, while not slowing it down to such an extent that the net overall effect on welfare would be negative, because of the resulting drop in the current generation's material standard of living.<sup>52</sup>

To this argument, it can first be objected that if the economic arguments alluded to in the previous section are correct, it is all but obvious that the substitution of a basic income for the conditional guaranteed minimum income schemes that now exist would actually

slow growth down – up to a certain level, at any rate. Secondly – and in my view decisively – even beyond this point, a basic income would constitute an extremely crude, unsophisticated way of braking the growth process for ecological purposes. It is not difficult to conceive of a scheme that would tax specifically those productions and consumptions which are particularly damaging to the environment or particularly costly in terms of natural resources, while using the proceeds to encourage activities with a positive effect in either of these respects. I cannot see how such a system could fail to achieve the same objectives in terms of environmental protection or resource preservation at a substantially lesser cost in terms of growth than a basic income system that would tax output indiscriminately (as most schemes would) and distribute the proceeds in an ecologically insensitive way. To rescue the argument, one would need to show that it is paid work as such that needs to be discouraged, because of some externality intrinsically associated with it – say, the impoverishment of neighbourhood life resulting from everyone going out to his/her job. But any precise suggestion of this kind would be vulnerable to the objection that a more closely targeted measure would deal better with the externality at hand than the far cruder basic income.

Why, then, is there a privileged association between the Green movement and support for basic income? My guess is that the most fundamental explanation lies in some 'cognitive dissonance' mechanism. It is, I think, a valid generalization that on average those joining Green movements attach comparatively little importance to income and the acquisition of goods, and comparatively great importance to the disposal of free time and the intrinsic value of their work.<sup>53</sup> But why is this so? Why is there a correlation between having this kind of preference (roughly, a high ranking of leisure relative to income) and advocating limits to growth? We have just seen that this can hardly be because environmental concerns mandate a shift to more free time, which basic income would make possible. The causal link, I conjecture, runs in the opposite direction. People to whom getting a higher income is comparatively unimportant are far more likely to put up with – and, *a fortiori*, to greet with glee – the prospect of a slowdown or even a standstill of our aggregate income than people for whom the ability to buy ever growing amounts of material goods and services is of paramount importance. At the same time, given the comparatively high value they attach to being able to use their time as they wish, they obviously have an interest in a basic income – indeed, in as high a level of basic income as is economically feasible. In other words, being 'Green' and supporting basic income have a common cause: a free-time-orientated preference structure. Self-interest is enough to explain why

people with such a preference structure become basic income supporters, and the (non-Greens) tendency to avoid cognitive dissonance explains why people with this preference structure are overrepresented in the Green movement.<sup>54</sup>

This, then, is the paradox. The reason why the Green movement (which reaches far beyond official Green parties) both tends to be well disposed towards a basic income and can afford to be hostile to growth lies in the 'postmaterialist' orientation of its members. But what the previous section and, more fully, the final chapter suggest is that a crucial – if not *the* crucial – argument for basic income must be that (up to some level, at any rate) basic income is growth-friendly. Does this not generate a painful contradiction which, once exposed, risks depriving basic income of the firmest components of its political basis? It need not.

For what is objectionable, for most Greens, is not output growth as such – which is, after all, a major precondition for satisfying the basic needs of a growing number of people and for expanding the life options of all, including those who attach comparatively little importance to consumption. What is objectionable is output growth pursued for its own sake and engineered at the prohibitive cost of massive environmental destruction and rapid resource exhaustion. Ever tighter measures will have to be taken, with a sizeable negative impact on output growth, to discipline the latter in such a way as to keep these costs in check. In this context, a measure – such as, arguably, the introduction of a basic income – which improves the working of the economy, for example by allowing the labour market to function in a way that is better suited to contemporary technological conditions, can only be welcome. And its growth-friendly nature cannot make it objectionable to Greens any more than to anyone else. They should therefore have no compunction in promoting it on these grounds, alongside other measures whose predictable effect is instead to curb growth. Up to some level, at any rate (providing the productivist argument for basic income is correct), they can and should defend basic income, not because its introduction would dampen growth, but because it would dampen the negative impact of indispensable measures for channelling growth in an environment-friendly way. Beyond that point, they can still advocate basic income on other grounds – whether of justice, community or self-interest – but they will do so although, not because, growth is thereby hampered.

#### 14. Conclusion

Let us sum up. When arguing for basic income, its advocates often mention particular objectives whose value is taken for granted, and

claim that basic income provides an efficient means of achieving them. But because there are many valuable objectives, and because they often conflict, such arguments, even when they are fully persuasive, can always be countered by asking 'So what?' This is why the debate on basic income keeps prompting arguments of a more ambitious kind, attempts to derive basic income from an explicit formulation of the ideal of a free, equal or good society. It is arguments of this type which the bulk of this book aims to present, defend and discuss, and which this introductory chapter has attempted to survey. The importance of such arguments does not make more limited efficiency arguments irrelevant, partly because many of these fit, as partial components, into arguments of the more ambitious sort, and partly because some of them – in particular, economic-efficiency arguments – may point to crucial conditions for the feasibility of the proposed reform.

Thus we need to pay these many more limited dimensions of the debate on basic income all the attention they deserve. In the end, however, we shall find the strength to fight for the introduction of a significant basic income – and the breath that will undoubtedly be needed if this fight is ever to be successful – only if we feel confident that the proposal can be backed by a defensible conception of a less unjust or a better society. It is our job, as political philosophers, to articulate such conceptions in a consistent, informed, critical way, and to sort out carefully what follows from them and what does not – in this case, as regards the introduction of an unconditional income. This job, clearly, is not finished as this book goes to press, but this volume should provide anyone who wishes to go further with a rich and stimulating starting point.

#### Notes

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